

WAYNE LOTTER

The ivory game

The fighter for Tanzania's elephants was killed on August 16

NO LANDSCAPE was dearer to Wayne Lotter than the savannah of southern Africa, and in particular one corner of it, the Selous-Niassa Wildlife Corridor round the Ruvuma river in Tanzania. He cherished it from the air, circling in a microlight over the dry rolling plains, the miombo woodlands, the white river bed and the bright-green hippo marshes; he surveyed it from lurching Land Rovers and on foot, brushing his way through the tall elephant grass. Sometimes he was the only human, and even he was in his khaki ranger's camouflage. Almost invisible, he would listen to the voices of the elephants and lions that really ruled this place.

Too often on his sorties, though, his stomach would start to knot. An elephant would scream out, alerting the herd. Or, on a breeze, he would catch that smell. It was a stench that hit you from 100 metres away: rotting elephant. And there, soon enough, would be the carcass, swollen in the sun, too much meat even for the scavengers to keep up with. The face would be hacked off with an axe or machete and the

tusks, of course, would be gone.

Over his time in Tanzania he found hundreds of such carcasses, sometimes 14 in a day. He never got used to it. But he had landed in the world's hotspot for ivory poaching: between 2009 and 2014, Tanzania lost 60% of its elephants. Astounded by the slaughter, he and two colleagues, Krissie Clark and Ally Namangaya, founded the Protected Area Management Solutions (PAMS) Foundation in 2009 to do what they could to slow it down.

He had spent long enough in conservation — 25 years, much of it in Kruger National Park, his first love from childhood, and in Kwa-Zulu Natal — to know that simply throwing money at policing was woefully ineffective. It was stupid to address just the symptom, the poaching, rather than the causes. He was fighting networks that stretched from poor villages in the wildlife areas to fancy shops in Beijing and ivory-carving factories in Vietnam, involving not only the poachers and the henchmen who controlled them but corrupt individuals in government, the judiciary, the



Wayne Lotter's intelligence-led policing was so successful that in five years more than 2,000 poachers were arrested. Photo credit: PAMS Foundation

police and, he insisted, even NGOs and conservation departments. His biggest problem was that almost no group or institution was clean. At the village end, poachers

flashed their money and lured in other young men; at the Far Eastern end, demand was insatiable. As fast as the rangers armed themselves, the poachers went one better,

toting Kalashnikovs against single-shot rifles. Penalties for their crimes were laughably light; ivory left the Selous in an unending stream. Even if he lopped a head off this octopus, he would find several legs still hard at work.

To fight this, he proposed an idea he had first heard from a detective in South Africa: when investigating a crime, create a network of informants. His were local people, incentivised with uniforms, cash and GPS devices to patrol in a buffer zone round their villages, recording the movements of elephants and also of their would-be killers, intercepting them and their rifles before they even reached the park. He wanted scouts to mingle, too, with the poachers living in their villages, finding out so much about them that, when arrested, they would instantly spill the beans on their paymasters. After all, the ivory they were paid five euros a kilo for was going for 2,000 euros in China.

This intelligence-led policing was so successful that in five years more than 2,000 poachers were arrested; the rate of poaching, he reckoned, was reduced by more than half, and the elephant population began to stabilise. Yet rangers, as he saw them, were like goalkeepers in a football team: the last line of defence. He also had to persuade farmers not to attack the elephants who trampled their crops, but to keep them away with barriers of chilli plants or beehives. He taught schoolchildren to value nature, and to put themselves in the paws, feet and hooves of the wild

creatures that lived alongside them. (In fact, he wanted everyone in the world to try that exercise.) And he fortified Tanzania's own serious-crime investigation agency with money for sniffer dogs and handlers and strong backing for timid prosecutors. As a result he helped get several kingpins arrested and tried, including Yang Fenglan, "The Queen of Ivory", and Boniface Methew Malyango, known as Shetani, "The Devil has no Mercy".

No place for a tie

He made little of his role, though. When Leonardo DiCaprio asked him to appear in his documentary *The Ivory Game* in 2016, he told him to film his village rangers instead. They did it all; he was just the one who went round, joking despite his anger, to ginger people up. He was fighting a war and, as in a war, he wanted his NGO to be nimble and unpredictable—no place for a collar and tie, which he barely knew the use of. The more ponderous and narrowly focused a conservation outfit was, the more easily poachers could corrupt it.

The gunman who forced his taxi door and shot him on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam probably killed him for his work. He knew it could happen; he had death threats all the time. With typical bravado he ignored them, and just went out again to watch with a cherubic smile a herd of elephant making their way across the Tanzanian savannah, safer than they were.